27.01.2022: Prof. em. Dr. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (University of Göttingen)

“The Silence of the Lambs. The Postcolonial Museum Debate and How the Image of Ethnology Suffers in Public Perception”

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Prof. Dr. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin opened the session by stating that in most current postcolonial portrayals in the media, earlier generations of ethnologists—those who conducted research and built collections during the colonial era—are harshly and indiscriminately criticized. They are long dead and cannot defend themselves. They remain voiceless because contemporary ethnologists stay silent; they let these accusations stand as if they had nothing to do with them.

She emphasized that the point is not to defend colonial-era research uncritically, but rather to resist the black-and-white representations circulating in public discourse—designed along a simple perpetrator/victim dichotomy—and to demand nuance and fairness. Why does this not happen? Perhaps, Hauser-Schäublin suggested, modern ethnologists fear being accused of downplaying colonialism and being pushed into a “right-wing corner.”

Apparently, she argued, ethnologists today have not yet realized that the one-sided postcolonial portrayals in the media are not merely about the researchers and collectors of the past, but ultimately also about the discipline itself. In the postcolonial “truths” spread through sensationalist media, the goal dictates the method. Actors of the colonial era are categorically depicted as “brutal and inhumane men and women,” while ethnologists are branded as “cruel henchmen” of colonialism. The “colonized,” by contrast, are stylized as innocent victims.

According to this logic, it is claimed that at least 80% of all objects in ethnological collections constitute “colonial loot.”

Postcolonial activists employ various methods to confirm their truths: they apply predetermined perpetrator–victim schemes—on one side, “white, brutal perpetrators,” on the other, “egalitarian, powerless, peace-loving indigenous victims.” This produces rigid, opposing, and homogenous categories. Moreover, sources—especially written works by earlier ethnologists—are combed through selectively, with only those passages retained that fit the desired perpetrator–victim template.

This involves one-sided and partial storytelling about objects, twisting sources, misinterpreting evidence, and omitting everything that does not fit the pattern ("'Indigenous peoples' cannot be 'perpetrators'"). Such methods, Hauser-Schäublin argued, lay the groundwork for "the exercise of summary justice and judgment based on the moral and legal standards of the 20th and 21st centuries."

The scholarly need to contextualize actions in their spatial and temporal frameworks—and to proceed through successive steps of understanding and explanation before judgment—is ignored. Instead, an emotionalized style of writing and speech fosters and fuels a "culture of outrage" about colonialism and ethnology in the public sphere.

The use of certain terms, such as "cultural heritage," to describe material (and immaterial) cultural goods—often imagined as the collective property of an entire, homogenous population—also affects ethnologists. "Cultural heritage," Hauser-Schäublin explained, is not an analytical but a normative concept, since it presupposes that only the "heirs" of former owners can be the legitimate proprietors of a cultural object. Such normative terms, when used uncritically, underpin both European activist agendas and indigenous identity politics.

She noted that few ethnologists publicly comment on these issues, and when they do, many print media are unwilling to publish their voices.

Hauser-Schäublin then presented two specific examples—regarding the alleged acquisition circumstances of the Benin Bronzes and the ocean-going canoe from the island of Luf (Papua New Guinea) displayed in the Humboldt Forum—to illustrate how postcolonial "truths" based on misinformation and manipulated sources reach the public.

She also pointed to how these postcolonial "truth narratives" reflect back on ethnology as a modern discipline. This is evident, for example, in a statement by former German Minister of State for Culture Monika Grütters, who told Der Spiegel (June 28, 2021) that "ethnology, in its traditional worldview, has been shaken by the current debate on colonialism." Grütters added that those responsible must now answer the question: "Didn't you know?"

Hauser-Schäublin stressed that the public generally does not distinguish between university ethnology and museum ethnology—and that the discipline's image suffers from its own silence. Even among her colleagues, she observed, understanding for ethnology has declined. One journalist, editor, and ethnologist wrote to her: "The ravens are beginning to circle above our discipline," adding, "Perhaps we now need a popular science magazine, written by experts, to make ethnology intelligible again to a broader audience."

Hauser-Schäublin posed the question: “Has ethnology lost its legitimacy in the public sphere?”

Discussion:

The discussion began with a quotation from Hauser-Schäublin’s article “Provenance Research Between Politicized Truth-Finding and Systematic Diversion.” She had written there:

“Many of the officials, collectors, and scholars active during the colonial period were hardly aware of the injustice they were directly or indirectly involved in, since a different self-understanding and different moral standards prevailed at that time.”

A participant asked whether this statement was not apologetic and colonialism-justifying, since it focused exclusively on the perpetrators’ perspective and ignored the possibility that the affected communities may very well have recognized such acts as unjust—and may have had their own norms and laws condemning them.

Hauser-Schäublin replied that her point was not to stress the “innocence” of the so-called perpetrators, but to situate actions in their historical time and place. Scientifically, it is essential first to understand and explain contexts before passing judgment. “Summary justice,” she said, has nothing to do with scholarly clarification but with activism.

Another participant pointed out that many researchers studied Saharan cultures with great respect and appreciation. Their reports—temporal and cultural snapshots—remain valuable for understanding the cultural-historical development of present-day societies. Moreover, local populations often still welcome these writings as sources of knowledge about their own past. Could ethnology, then, be defended when such work is positively received by those it once studied?

Hauser-Schäublin agreed. For instance, in Micronesia (Palau), the writings of ethnologist Augustin Krämer (1865–1941) are highly valued. Krämer produced a unique multi-volume documentation of Palauan culture in text and image—detailed descriptions, drawings, and photographs—and recorded local stories and myths. Today, Palauans treat his books as historical reference works that provide insight into their past.

Another participant referred to historian Götz Aly’s rebuttal to Hauser-Schäublin’s article in Die Zeit, in which he accused her of attempting to relativize colonial atrocities. Aly argued that while contextualizing the Benin Bronzes may show they were also symbols of brutal oppression, this does not change the illegality of their seizure by colonial powers.

Hauser-Schäublin responded that, although the question deserves deeper discussion, the Benin Bronzes were indeed symbols of domination—used to legitimize a despotic

regime that oppressed, exploited, and killed both neighboring peoples and its own citizens. As a deliberately provocative comparison, she cited the public toppling of Saddam Hussein's bronze statue in Baghdad in 2003 by U.S. soldiers. Why, she asked, is this not described as a neo-colonial, violent act—an unlawful appropriation and destruction of cultural property—but rather celebrated as an act of "liberation"? The destruction of the Iraqi dictator's statue, she noted, is considered legitimate, while the confiscation of the Benin Bronzes—symbols of a despot's power—is condemned as illegitimate. That, she concluded, is a hypocritical argument.

One listener remarked that the general lack of differentiation in these debates is problematic. Museum professionals are aware of the diversity of individual cases, yet public discourse often reduces them to a stark black-and-white polarity. Reality, however, is far more nuanced—there are many shades of gray and few purely "black" or purely "white" cases. This lack of nuance is also evident in museum guidelines, especially regarding objects of ethnological origin. She asked how museums could make their perspectives heard when, in interviews, journalists often quote only one "acceptable" sentence—later claiming that museums refuse to comment.

In closing, Hauser-Schäublin reiterated that contemporary "indigenous" perspectives on cultural objects often differ greatly from those of local contemporaries in the past. For instance, a Nigerian historian from the royal Benin family, who interviewed eyewitnesses of the British conquest of Benin City, once wrote that he was glad that the "brutal tyranny of the king" had ended. Today, however, the tone in Benin City is quite different. Attitudes and opinions, she concluded, are shaped by their time—and thus subject to change.